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Chinese Plan to Sell U.S. Arms to Iran

Before they've even negotiated a deal to buy U.S. military hardware, the Chinese are dickered to sell some of it to Iran, according to recent intelligence reports classified higher than top secret.

The People's Republic of China, which wants to buy arms from the Pentagon without the standard agreement not to resell them to third parties without U.S. approval, did not volunteer the information about the secret negotiations with Iran. It was picked up through clandestine intelligence-gathering.

Intelligence sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that Peking intended to hide sales to Iran. The Chinese told Tehran that, as part of a separate agreement, the weapons would be routed through a Mediterranean NATO country. In an evenhanded gesture, the Chinese also offered Iran any military items they may get from Soviet bloc countries.

Peking has been selling the Iranians some Chinese-made helicopters, howitzers and missiles that have been rendered surplus by modernization of the divisions along the Sino-Soviet border.

After four years of war with Iraq, the Iranians badly need spare parts for American hardware the Khomeini regime inherited from the shah. They found two U.S. allies to sell them the goods: Israel and South Korea.

Behind-the-scenes pressure from Washington last summer got the South Koreans to stop their sales to Iran, which had consisted mainly of artillery shells. But no amount of pressure has moved the Israelis, who publicly deny the arrangement.

So the arms sales continue, through middlemen, who make cursory efforts to disguise Israeli involvement. For example, arms dealers are looking for a country willing to pose as the "end-user" of Israeli M48 tanks that would be shipped to Iran.

The United States is not happy with the Israeli-Iranian arms traffic, but intelligence officials realize that the deal is helpful to Israel and thus to U.S. interests in the long run. They explain that the Israelis sell arms to Iran because they get oil in return, they prefer Iran to Iraq, it helps prolong a war that weakens the Arab world and they need the money.

In fact, an account of an Iranian Cabinet meeting last May indicates that Tehran is unhappy at the doubling of arms prices in the past two years.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini hasn't been relying on the Chinese and Israelis alone to supply his war machine. Iranian arms buyers have been ranging the globe in search of \$2 billion worth of munitions.

At about the time South Korea was persuaded to stop selling arms to Iran, North Korea began supplying land mines and rocket grenades.

Khomeini's arms scouts have also found promising sources in Argentina and Brazil. They're bargaining with Argentina for Tam tanks, French-made Mirage fighters, Israeli Dagger fighters, some old destroyers and a helicopter. Brazil appears willing to palm off on the desperate Iranians some amphibious armored cars, small boats, mortar shells, hand grenades, rockets, bombs and ammunition.